

# The Detroit News

## **Bizdom U: Boot camp aims to create Detroit businesses**

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By: Jennifer Youssef

Traditional college business courses weren't cutting it for Rena Willis. She did well in her classes, but something was missing -- the spark, the fire she needed to set in motion her dreams of becoming an entrepreneur.

"I was getting great grades at Schoolcraft (College)," said Willis, a 22-year-old from Wayne who wants a career in the real estate industry. "But I wasn't motivated."

She found motivation at Bizdom U, a fledgling two-year program based in Detroit that provides entrepreneurs with the real-life lessons they need to start and operate a business. The first class is starting its second semester, and a new class will begin meeting in September.

The intense two-year business boot camp -- free to participants -- aims to develop entrepreneurs specifically to operate a company headquartered in Detroit. The program, in turn, is majority owner of any business that Bizdom U students create with the program's help.

There are 12 students in the first class of Bizdom U, which was created by Dan Gilbert, chairman and founder of Quicken Loans Inc. The program is run from leased space at Wayne State University.

The pilot class is going exceedingly well, Executive Director Ross Sanders said. So well that organizers don't expect to make many changes for the incoming class.

After one semester, students say Bizdom U is giving them confidence, teaching them skills and putting them on a path to success.

### **A rigorous curriculum**

The nonprofit program is multi-dimensional, with a strict regimen of business classes, real-life work experience, projects, speakers and a mentorship program. It prepares entrepreneurs for the rigorous, fast-paced schedule of a business owner, program leaders said.

Students are up by 6:30 a.m. to read business journals, magazines and other publications so they are up to date about the business world, then go to class from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

The rest of the day and evening is spent doing homework, meeting mentors, working on class projects and at part-time jobs. Students are typically involved in two to four projects at a time. Their day usually ends around midnight.

The requirements to get into the program are tough. Students must be willing to commit to demanding and challenging training, and must possess drive and passion, program organizers said.

The incentives to make the commitment and succeed are generous. Not only are tuition, books, housing and meals free, but graduating students get help with the start-up costs of their new ventures, which Bizdom U will partly own.

Profits from the businesses will be shared by the entrepreneur and the program, which will use the money to help finance other businesses established by Bizdom U students.

Students rearing to go

John Hughes of Troy is willing to share some of the proceeds from his start-up company - he wants to have some sort of Internet-related business -- for the chance to work with and learn from some of the region's biggest movers and shakers. He said the program has him thinking at a higher level about businesses.

"It's an amazing opportunity," Hughes, 23, said of the program. "It's exposed me to influences and people I wouldn't have gotten to know otherwise."

Listening to inspiring business and civic leaders who frequently visit the classes -- among them NBA Hall of Famer Earvin "Magic" Johnson and Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick -- has inspired Tawnya Clark of Detroit, whose dream is to own an apparel design business. She joined Bizdom U to learn how to operate a company that would eventually expand to several locations.

"I knew I wanted my business to grow and I wanted to do it right," said 36-year-old Clark.

She picked up the mantra "Failure is not an option" from Bob Lanier, another NBA Hall of Famer who spoke to the class, as well as confidence and leadership skills, she said.

Benefits for Detroit seen

Bizdom U will help Detroit solve its economic woes, said Josh Linkner, CEO of ePrize, a Pleasant Ridge company that he's turned into the world's largest online promotions company.

A fierce advocate of the program, Linkner said it not only creates hope and business opportunities, but it also helps build successful companies that will invest in the city, hire workers and diversify the economy.

Linkner's company is heavily involved with the program. He mentors a Bizdom U student, and the company is giving the class its final exam this semester. Students will be assigned to develop their own marketing agency and market one of ePrize's products.

"I am personally super-excited about Bizdom U," Linkner said. "It's a phenomenal program for Detroit."

If the pilot program is successful here, Sanders said he would like to offer it in other Michigan communities and other states.